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ABSTRACT

A more flexible definition of literacy combines oral literacy, which focuses on the concrete, with written literacy, which is abstract. For W. Ong, F. DeAngelo, A. R. Luria, and others who have done research on oral and written cultures, their central concern is one of defining and describing the kind and form of consciousness that is represented by the media that dominate the culture. Literacy, therefore, is more than the mechanical ability to read and write; it is the ability to understand what is read and to write what is understood. M. L. Pratt argues that literary theorists must come to recognize the institutional context within which the acts of reading and writing operate. S. Fish further develops this idea of literacy as social contract by adding to it the idea of interpretive communities. Practical application of this theory suggests that composition classes should create basic interpretive communities, that students need to recognize and use both oral and written skills, and finally that students must be helped to understand the academic community's concept of literacy while they are simultaneously encouraged to translate their own oral forms of literacy into this new community's systems of reading and writing. (SRT).

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The Meaning of Literacy
in a Culture of Writing and Reading

Joseph John Comprone

I wish to begin this talk with some notes toward a definition of literacy. Somewhere between the notions of literacy as function and literacy as power lies the definition for which I am searching. But before I embark on a theoreical search, I wish to take a brief journey back into my own past.

My grandmother was first generation Italian. She had come to this country at fourteen, already promised to my grandfather, ready to spend what nowadays we call teenage or adolescent life as a seamstress in a South Philadelphia sweatshop, doing piecework sewing, a skill that she remained proud of for the rest of her life. My grandmother made a life for herself here, working as a seamstress until a few years after her marriage at sixteen, raising three daughters in a poor but relatively safe ethnic neighborhood, supporting my grandfather as he built a food-distribution business that began in half of a Philadelphia Dock Street garage into a modest but thriving business.

What I am interested in here, though, is not any kind of Italian-American success story. Rather I want to think aloud with you for just a moment about my grandmother's attitude toward literacy as that attitude was represented to me in her interactions with my generation.

I have time to describe only one situation. I remember a particular dinner-table conversation: several cousins, a younger brother, my father and mother, my grandmother at seventy-eight years old around her dining-room table. The grandchildren had already assimilated, as the

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experts say; we had graduated from college preparatory high school programs, read at least some of the classics of American and British literature, and at least the oldest of us had already gone to college; all were to graduate from colleges later--someday to become lawyers, psychologists, even, god forbid, college professors. The oldest of us had serious girlfriends, as we put it then, many of whom were not Italian. The remains of Lasagnia, fish, and salad still in disarray, small glasses of wine growing out of the table cloth, the conversation turned to my father's recent trip to Scotland, where he had worked as an outside machinist in a Scottish shipyard. My father was telling stories of his experiences in Scotland. The content of those stories is not important to me now, but I do believe that the very different ways those of us scattered around that table responded to those stories is significant to our attempt to define literacy.

My grandmother, never a very fluent reader or writer, even of the Italian or American newspapers that occupied my grandparent's coffee table, fastened on the concrete facts of my father's stories. Her questions always focused on what happened next, what someone had worn, or what they had eaten before the story began. My generation of listeners were usually irritated or amused by what they thought were her simple questions; my father patiently and laboriously filled out the answers. The stories often were brought more alive by her questions, simple narrative outlines were filled out with the colors, sounds, and smells of Scottish culture, a culture, of course, strange to all of us, not just to my grandmother.

We, the young and assimilated, listened differently. My cousin, the someday lawyer, my brother, the would-be counsellor, my cousin the

future psychologist, and me--the budding college professor--we were interested in what now I would call the "implications" of my father's story. Our shared experience as readers and writers had created in us a drive to understand that was very different from my grandmother's. We wanted to know, or we thought we had a right to ask and consider, questions of cross-cultural significance and meaning: Why did your Scottish apprentice think that Americans had no respect for tradition? Did the schooling of Scottish shipworkers better prepare them for skilled labor? Did the climate in Scotland alter the approach to ship maintenance in a Scottish shipyard from what it might have been in America?

These are, of course, as A.R. Luria has illustrated in his work with Russian peasants, the types of questions that illiterates usually do not ask, and it was not surprising that my grandmother, surrounded by people who valued formal education and upward mobility far more than she had early in her life, dutifully deferred to our educated abstractions. She remained, perhaps sceptically, silent in the context of this informal application of interpretive strategies. After all, the drive toward abstract understanding of experienced events was part of being educated, and in most properly-motivated Italian families from South Philadelphia this drive was given a high place in the community's heirarchy of values.

This conflict of literacies is characteristic of much of our national consciousness. We are a nation of literate schizoids, often pulled toward my grandmother's oral literacy while we give our esteem to my generations's abstract literacy. And this is understandable. We wish, on the one hand, to savor our own cultural experiences, our own Jewish, black, ethnic, or mainstream pasts in narratives that are concrete, hearable and

touchable versions of common feeling and aspiration. And it is in the oral give-and-take of concrete narrative that we find these values reinforced. The Color Purple is simply another example of this basic, literate and human impulse. But we also, caught in this literate double-bind, have a powerful need to understand the implications--the between-the-lines, behind-the-sound-of-the-words meanings--of our experience.

Obviously, at this point in my remarks I have begun to move from my personal experience to its general significance, and back to my central concern: a more flexible definition of literacy. My grandmother's literacy was in one sense of the term not functional, or at best minimally functional. She deferred to bankers who told her how to "read" a loan application (although my grandparents actually distrusted written contracts to the point that they waited until they had saved the cash to buy their first home, a brick row house that cost them $1500.00 in 1932), to her grandchildren, who helped her understand the newspaper, to my grandfather, who oversaw the family budget. But she was a bear at the South Street market, able to apply the watchful eye of years of domestic experience to the grocer's scales, to feel because of all those years of seamstressing the irregular lines of a badly-sewn garments. All of our more educated generation, despite our shared inter-generational jokes at her expense, were in awe of her functional skills. Not one of us ever expected that my grandmother, even during the depression, had ever had any trouble putting a meal on the table.

We written literates around that dinner table, however, were able to do something with and through language that my grandmother was never able to do. We were at least potentialy able to assert the significance of

our personal experience in a broader, cultural context. And we did this primarily through abstraction, by asking ourselves and my father the narrator questions about the significance of the experience. Of course, a good deal of immediacy and emotional power was often sacrificed in the process of abstracting. But the important fact here is probably an emotional as well as an intellectual one. We, my brother and cousins, believed that a higher, more abstrct level of understanding of life's experience really did exist, and we, despite or because of our occasional ironies, also believed that somewhere in human culture there existed an ideal community of truth-seekers, a Platonic group of ethereal creatures who did think, despite all the corruption around them, that ideas were worth something, that concepts like justice did matter in an unjust world. My grandmother had never really believed that. She had simply lived in a smaller world, limited by her strong conviction that life was to be lived as best one could by protecting oneself against the onslaughts of others, and by surrounding oneself with the recognizable and concrete manifestations of family and community

What does all this have to do with my abstract discussion of literacy? And how does this experience tie in with the concern of this community, with teachers of reading and writing? In the rest of this paper, I will try to apply what I have extracted from that dinner-table conversation, with its written and oral conflicts of consciousness, to some recent theory. My hope is that my application will take us a small step toward the goal of integrating current theories of functional and abstract literacy.

The work of Frank DeAngelo and Walter Ong can help establish this

theoretical base. DeAngleo, in a recent article, uses the work of Russian psychologist A.R. Luria to provide some distinctions between the functional-concrete cognitive processes of illiterate peasants and the abstract, logical processes of formally-educated readers and writers.[1] Like my grandmother, these non-readers and writers have developed what Ong might call an oral-based intelligence of their own, often a very successful means of controlling their immediate work and home environment, just as my grandmother had evolved the means of providing for a family that was reinforced by her functional bargaining with grocers and clothiers at the market place. But on tests in which these illiterate subjects were asked to distinguish concrete objects into abstract, verbal categories, their performance was deficient. Presented with a picture of three tools, for example--say a hammer, a knife, and shears--the illiterate subjects would ignore the potential verbal category tool and proceed to narrate and describe what a person might do with these tools. They would tell how a person who possessed these tools might use them in butchering an animal: knocking the animal unconscious with the hammer, butchering the animal with the knife, and trimming fat from the cuts of meat with the shears.

Ong carries Luria's and DeAngelo's distinctions betwen oral and written cultures several steps further. He argues that thought and action in primarily oral cultures is always tied to immediate contexts, and that the language of oral literates functions primarily in narrative forms in which actions and events are bound by immediate or immediately-recalled spatial and temporal structures. In fact, Ong tells us, expert oral composers and their audiences are far more adept at weaving intricate narrative fabrics than are most of their literate counterparts.

For Ong, DeAngelo, Luria, and others who have done research on oral and written cultures, the central concern of those who study and teach literacy is one of defining and describing the kind and form of consciousness that is represented by the media that dominate the culture. This conceptual approach to literacy, however, has often been at odds with the approaches of those, at either end of the political spectrum, who have dealt with functional literacy in our public, educational institutions. Because they have always associated the concept of function with the acquisition of discrete skills, these back-to-basics type of thinkers have evolved an approach to functional literacy that emphasizes mechanical and rote learning over the idea that what we are teaching when we teach literacy are new forms of consciousness, new ways of seeing and constructing reality, new ways, in the end, of gaining and maintaining power in the world. Paolo Freire captures the gist of what I mean when he says:

> To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and to write what one understands; it is to communicate graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables--lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe--but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context.[2]

All this probably seems to have very little to do with next Tuesday's English 101 class. But I shall close by suggesting that it does.

And I wish, as well, to pull together two concepts currently prominent in current literary theory to help me along the way.

Mary Louise Pratt, in a recent book on speech-act theory and literary reading processes, argues that literary theorists must come to recognize the institutional context within which the acts of reading and writing operate. 'Using the ideas of speech-act theorists Grice, Searle, and Austen, Pratt describes what she calls the "literary speech situation." In the process of this description, Pratt explains how the book as artifact influences the literary community's reception of the language and ideas in that book. The book itself serves as an artifactual symbol that binds its readers to particular responses to its contents. A novel, for example, when it appears bound on the bookseller's shelf, has passed through a series of social/cultural processes: it has been reviewed and edited by many expert readers, it has received the financial backing of a publishing house, and, upon its publication, it has warranted the attention of reviewers and critics. Of course, the fact that these social screening processes exist has a great deal to do with a member of the literary community's individual response to the text of that novel. Pratt and many other contemporary literary theorists, such as Stanley Fish, argue that this broad social influence is what distinguishes literature from what we might call "ordinary" discourse. In other words, everyday, conversational and literary texts exhibit the same range of textual features. The difference between the two is not in the artifact or text itself, but in the responses of the communities who respond to those texts. Literary communities provide the significance embodied by the features of what they perceive to be a literary text.

Stanley Fish further develops this idea of literacy as social contract by adding to it the idea of interpretive communities. In his most recent book, Fish shows us that the strategies that we share as members of communities and subcommunities of readers and writers actually intervene in how we experience particular lines of literary texts. His shrewd analyses of the functions our shared interpretive strategies play as we perceive chunks of literary texts ought to convince us that at least a healthy percentage of the meaning of those chunks is influenced by preconditioned attitudes toward the text that we are reading. These attitudes become a fluent reader's strategies, or tools, for constructing interpretations.

Both Pratt and Fish provide us, as composition teachers, with a potential broadening of the context within which we have taught composition in this century. Our courses in reading and writing, if they are to approach literacy as a means of forming critical consciousness and not simply as a means of engendering textual skills, must come to partake of all of the following three processes:

1. Any composition class worth its salt must see itself as in the business of creating basic interpretive communities. We are not simply teaching the processes of reading and writing; we are teaching what it means to be literate in the broadest sense. This means that every composition classroom should become a more integral part of a student's general education by helping that student become part of what Kenneth Bruffee has called the academic community's "ongoing conversation," with itself, with other communities in writing across the curriculum programs, and with the pluralistic society that waits outside the academy's doors. Each

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assignment in a carefully planned composition unit must be seen as an occasion within which student readers and writers learn how the conventions of community membership affects their individual acts of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

2. Somewhere in every composition class students need to recognize and use both my grandmother's and my third-generation's oral and written skills. Certainly we should be at the point in our development as scholars and teachers of reading, writing, and orality where we know that my grandmother's oral and my generation's written skills were not reflective of states of illiteracy and literacy, but reflective instead of two different forms of literacy and the consciousnesses engendered by the two. My grandmother's ability to describe concretely, to narrate dramatically, and to engage in oral give-and-take is and can be taught as a natural part of producing convincing and human written abstractions. We are all, as members of a literary community in its broadest sense, the products of both oral and written culture. In our classrooms, this means that speaking, listening, reading, and writing need to be integrated into units that bring students through the combined communal-personal stages of composing a successful essay.

3. Finally, I believe the redefinition of literacy that I have described suggests that we revise and reformulate our approaches to writing across the curriculum. At the freshman and sophomore levels, our students must be helped to understand the academic community's concept of literacy while they are simultaneously encouraged to translate their own oral forms of literacy into this

new community's systems of reading and writing. This process of translation will require systematic exposure to the ways of knowing that are used, first, by the academic community in general and, second, by disciplines in that community in particular. We must be careful in developing curriculum to assure that our approach to compositon in the broader context of general education shares this emphasis on new forms of literacy, on diverging epistemologies, and on the effects of interpretive communities in our roles as readers and writers. Only later, when these larger contexts have been explored, should a college composition curriculum encourage analysis of the specific forms and audiences of professional discourse.

I must close with an admission. What I am supporting today is a way of holding on to my past. My grandmother and that dinner table are part of me. Yet I am very much a part of this community as well. I see no reason to let go of either. And I hope that I can teach my students, and that you can teach yours, to hold on to both their pasts and their futures. For it is in this holding to past and future that we find the true meaning of literacy, and that we find as well the expanded sense of consciousness that would encompass both my grandmother and those around her dinner table.

NOTES

[1] I have used Frank D'Angelo's "Luria on Literacy: The Cognitive Consequences of Reading and Writing" and Luria's Cognitive Development as background for my discussion of Luria's work.

[2] Education for Critical Consciousness, p. 48. See also Pedagogy of the Oppressed for specific illustrations of teaching techniques based on Luria's theory of literate consciousness.

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